

## Author Abraham Verghese answers questions posed by Bee readers

By Allen Pierleoni

Monday, Jun. 14, 2010

Abraham Verghese, a physician, sees a spiritual as well as a physical element in treating illness. [Abraham Verghese](#) enjoys coming to [Sacramento](#), and we obviously love seeing him: He was a hit at the [National Kidney Foundation's](#) Authors Luncheon at the [Hyatt Regency Hotel](#) in November and sold out the [Crest Theatre](#) in February.

In preparation for his Bee Book Club appearance on Thursday, we asked you readers to help "interview" him. You posed questions suitable for a physician and a writer.

For instance, [Claire Westdahl](#) of Roseville asked: How would you change the health-care system? That might be a tough one for most novelists but not for [Verghese](#), who is both a professor of medicine at [Stanford University](#) and the author of the best-selling novel "Cutting for [Stone](#)" ([Vintage](#), \$15.95, 688 pages).

He had a ready reply: "Reform the fee-for-service model. (Right now) we get paid to do a thing, which creates a great temptation to do that same thing many times, unnecessarily. If we had a model where we're paid not for every procedure we do, but just for taking care of the patient, there would be a lot less abuse" of the system.

The world of medicine provides a great deal of inspiration for [Verghese](#). In "[Stone](#)," he follows a family of doctors involved in personal and medical dramas from [India](#) and [Ethiopia](#) to the United States, spanning 50 years.



Parts of the story were drawn from Verghese's own life. He was born near Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, to parents of Indian descent. His medical training was interrupted when Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed and imprisoned in 1974 and the country dropped into further chaos.

Verghese (pronounced "Ver-geese") finished medical school in India and came to the United States, where he practiced in Tennessee, Massachusetts and Texas before moving to California. Along the way, he wrote two memoirs, "My Own Country" (1994) and "The Tennis Partner" (1998).

As a physician, he has three specialties: internal medicine, pulmonary diseases and infectious diseases. He and his wife, Sylvia, live with their three children in Menlo Park.

Now it's time for your questions – and one from Bee staff.

### What does the title "Cutting for Stone" refer to?

– Nancy Aaberg, Sacramento; Virginia Smyth, Fair Oaks; and P. Gulsha, Sacramento

That antique line from the Hippocratic Oath stems from a time when kidney and bladder stones were epidemic (and deadly). There were some (surgeons) who could cut for stone, but then they'd wipe their blades on their pants and head off to the next village. It was extremely dangerous (because of infections). The phrase implies, "Leave that for people who know what they're doing."

But I think titles should be a little mysterious. (In the book) it could mean that the sons are cutting for their father.

**Why is the fractured family the interesting family?**

– Patricia Tweedy, Sacramento

Loss is an issue with me. I was displaced from the country of my birth, and I've been through a failed marriage. So perhaps subconsciously, that is partly why there's a lot of it in (the novel). But I also think there's no story otherwise.

**How difficult was it for you to adjust to American life?**

– Georgia Econome, Sacramento

Much of the rest of the world grows up on Americana (movies, books, music, clothing). One has a peculiar sense of finally having arrived at the place you were meant to be. That said, there were still a lot of adjustments.

**Cross-cultural differences are integral to the story. How have they affected you personally?**

– Jane Bonnet, Citrus Heights

They've made me appreciative of the spectrum of human behavior. That sense of encompassing all in the breadth of your interests is partly cultural and partly (from) being a physician. (A doctor) has to be as interested in the drunk as he is in the preacher.

**You've said, "I write in order to understand what I'm thinking." Please explain.**

– Janet Shaban, Sacramento

The act of writing taps into something that's different from sitting and thinking. For example, if I set out to write a piece on something I've taken a fancy to, I might have a very good idea of what I want to write. But when I (physically) sit down and start writing, what emerges is slightly mysterious. It comes from the right brain, and you couldn't have found it otherwise. Call it the muse or whatever.

**What's your daily writing routine?**

– Dot James, Lone

With three kids and a full-time job, it's catch as catch can – late nights, early mornings, weekends. I wouldn't change it. Being in full-time medicine is where the writing impulse comes from, so I don't want to mess with that.

**(Please contrast) curing and healing.**

– Susan M. Osborn, Citrus Heights

Every illness has a physical deficit as well as a sense of spiritual violation. You break your leg and you have a break in the femur, but there's also a great sense of, "Why me? Why now?" Medicine has done a great job of taking care of the break, but not as good a job of dealing with the sense of violation people feel with illness.

To me, that is the distinction between curing and healing – addressing the body and addressing the soul that's in great distress.

**Dr. Kalpana "Hema" Hemlatha returns to the teeming sights, sounds and smells of Addis Ababa, triggering in her a craving for doro wat (Ethiopian chicken curry). It feels like a longing you know well. Is it?**

– C.M. Anderson, Sacramento Bee features editor

Very much so. The wonderful thing about living in Northern California is the (many) Ethiopian restaurants, so I have many opportunities to satisfy my craving for doro wat.

**ABRAHAM VERGHESE**

What: The author will speak to The Bee Book Club, answer questions and autograph "Cutting for Stone."

When: 6 p.m. Thursday

Where: Borders Books, 2339 Fair Oaks Blvd., Sacramento

Information: (916) 564-0168; (916) 321-1128

Cost: The event is free, and the public is invited. The book is \$15.95 (Vintage Paperbacks, 688 pages).

Get 30 percent off the paperback edition through Thursday at all Borders and Barnes & Noble stores, and at Book Lovers, Avid Reader in Sacramento and Davis, Time Tested Books, Underground Books, Carol's Books, Hornet Bookstore at CSUS, the UC Davis Bookstore and the Bookseller in Grass Valley.

[© Copyright The Sacramento Bee. All rights reserved.](#)